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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 000967

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SUBJECT: PILLARS OF THE REGIME PART II OF IV: THE EAST BANK TRIBES

REF: AMMAN 6535

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Traditionally, the most important pillar of the Hashemite regime has been its East Bank constituency, including both Bedouin and non-nomadic tribes. East Bank tribes have also played an integral role in the other pillars that have emerged--the military/security services and the economic elite. However, reform-minded King Abdullah may face problems as he tries to move Jordan into the 21st century while seeking to maintain the support of the most conservative elements of Jordanian society--the East Bank tribes. End Summary.

WHO ARE THE TRIBES?

2. (U) The East Bank tribes of Jordan constitute roughly 35-45 percent of the total population of Jordan. The Bedouins--nomadic tribes--make up roughly seven percent of the population. The Bedouin tribes, including the historically famous Howeitat (of Lawrence of Arabia fame), were instrumental in the formation of the Hashemite regime and continue today to serve in disproportionately large percentages in the armed forces and security services. They also make up one of the Public Security Directorate (PSD)'s best-known units, the Badia, or desert, police. The semi-nomadic tribes--traditionally herders--make up roughly 13-15 percent of the population and include the single largest tribe in Jordan, the Bani Hassan, who number over 200,000.

3. (U) The non-nomadic tribes account for much of the rest of the East Bank population and include such notable Jordanian families as the Majalis and the Tarawnehs from Kerak, both of whom have produced a number of Jordanian leaders and Hashemite advisors. These families, whose names are instantly recognizable in Jordan, are very influential elements of Jordanian political and economic life.

THE HASHEMITE DEPENDENCE ON THE TRIBES

4. (C) There has long been a symbiotic relationship between the Hashemite rulers in Jordan and the East Bank tribes. Jordan's tribes figured prominently in the Arab revolt against the Ottoman empire, led by King Abdullah I's father. Until recently, the tribes were unquestionably the Hashemites' most significant source of political power. As such, the Hashemites have cultivated personal relationships with the tribes, while carefully maintaining the balance of power between each. Regular contact with the tribes became a mainstay of Hashemite rule, beginning with King Abdullah I, who received tribal representatives at his al-Ma'wa palace every Friday during his reign. The Hashemites also often bestowed generous cash payments on the tribes to ensure their loyalty.

5. (U) King Hussein continued the tradition of nurturing the relationship with the tribes. He often camped with the Bedouins and frequently visited individual tribes for mensaf (the traditional East Bank Jordanian meal). On many occasions, he brought his sons, including King Abdullah and Crown Prince Hamza, to instill in them the importance of tribal ties. At the same time, King Hussein ably used historic tribal rivalries to check the power of individual tribes, thus ensuring that no tribal sheikh could ever rival his base of power.

6. (C) The tribes in turn benefited from their exclusive relationship with the Hashemites. While West Bank Palestinians are a majority of the population in Jordan, political institutions favor members of the East Bank tribes. While some ministerial positions traditionally are reserved for Christians and others, Muslim East Bankers occupy almost all the upper ranks of the Jordanian Armed Forces, the General Intelligence Directorate, and the PSD, (their children are favored in university admissions at Jordan's

competitive public universities); and they dominate almost every level of Jordan's bureaucracy.

KING ABDULLAH AND THE TRIBES

17. (C) When King Abdullah II ascended to the throne, he lacked his father's touch with the tribes and initially spent little effort in shoring up their support. He also ascended to a cash-strapped throne and, as some contacts have insinuated, he was unable to continue with the generous payments to the tribes. In 2000, just over a year into the King's reign, a tribal leader told us that the King had made a poor first impression on the tribes; "...his father left him a large political inheritance with the tribes, but he is spending it quickly." In 2001, during visits with the Howeitat and the Bani Hassan, tribal members voiced support for the Hashemites (and King Hussein), but rarely singled out the King for praise. To avoid direct criticism of the King, tribal members criticized the King's advisors, blaming them for what they perceived as the King's disappointing performance.

18. (C) That said, support for the Hashemites never really wavered. Tribal contacts are quick to stress their loyalty to the regime. One Howeitat told Poloff that he and his tribe would support the Hashemites down to Princess Salma (King Abdullah's youngest child). On a recent visit to the Shihab tribe, one tribal member told the Ambassador that it didn't matter if "we go to sleep hungry, it is fine with us" as long as the King was okay.

19. (C) Over the past two years, according to Palace contacts, King Abdullah moved to strengthen his ties with his tribal base. The King has done this by shuffling the Palace offices responsible for tribal relations, increasing (somewhat) his personal contact with key tribal leaders, greater attention to small tribal requests, and job-creation programs in tribal areas (such as busing employees from tribally-dominated areas such as Shobak, Kerak, and Tafileh to QIZ factories).

110. (C) These efforts have paid some dividends. During one outing last summer, the King met with almost 2,000 tribal leaders. In addition to pursuing closer contacts with the tribes, he initiated his social and economic development program, which targets the rural (more undeveloped) and heavily tribal areas. Sheikh Nawaf Eiton, a leader of the Bani Hassan tribe, had sharply criticized those around the King during a 2001 visit with Poloff. By the Summer of 2002, however, Sheikh Eiton was effusive about the King, telling one Poloff that the King had begun to reach out to the "real" tribal leaders (whom Eiton described as those leaders who have a genuine or moral authority with the tribe.)

111. (C) Prior to the build-up to the Iraqi situation, King Abdullah was also winning praise for his international political sensibilities. Politically savvy tribal members have commented on the King's ability to shore up regional alliances, secure economic and military assistance, and become a player in the international arena. Other tribal leaders have also positively remarked on the influence that King Abdullah has built in Washington.

CHALLENGES

112. (C) King Abdullah will likely weather any tribal discontent stemming from a U.S. offensive against Iraq, though not without some difficulties. Some Jordanian tribes have links to Iraq and/or extensive business ties. However, the desire for the stability and patronage offered by the Hashemites will likely overcome any pro-Iraqi sentiment. Looking into the future, however, the King will be challenged to move forward with the political and economic progress he envisions for Jordan while maintaining the support and loyalty of the East Bank tribes, who may be displaced by this progress.

113. (C) As the King attempts to move Jordan forward, his political and economic reform efforts threaten to undermine the patron-client relationship the tribes have traditionally enjoyed. Since King Hussein's "one man, one vote" electoral reform in 1993, tribes have enjoyed increased proportional representation in Parliament. King Abdullah reaffirmed this policy when he approved of a new electoral law in July, 2001, which increased the number of seats in Parliament but did not redistribute them. Whereas one representative in the second district of Amman represents roughly 500,000 people, one representative in Ma'an represents close to 50,000. (The Ma'an governorate houses the Howeitat--one of the King's most loyal tribes--although the non-Howeitat town of Ma'an has proved more troublesome to the Hashemites in the last decade. See Ref.) There has been intense pressure from those underrepresented groups--namely West Bank-origin

Palestinians--to democratize the electoral system. Thus far the King has resisted the pressure to do so because it would severely undercut the representation of the tribes--his most loyal constituent--in Parliament.

14. (C) Political reform has affected the tribes on the local level. Since the early 1990s, the Kingdom has moved to decrease the number of municipal governments. In 1991, there were over 700 municipalities in Jordan, each with their own government and employing thousands of people. To increase the solvency of the municipal governments (many of which were bankrupt), King Abdullah moved in 2001 to again reduce the 328 municipalities to less than 100. Tribal leaders complained that this undermined their ability to secure employment (and other patronage) for their members. To counter criticism from the tribes, the King ensured that tribes would remain at the helm of municipal governments by changing the law to allow the central government to appoint mayors instead of electing them.

15. (C) The King is also under domestic and international pressure to decrease the prevalence of the patronage system (wasta), the power base of the East Bank tribes. As King Abdullah moves (slowly) towards a merit-based system, the tribes have the most to lose.

COMMENT

16. (C) The loyalty offered by the East Bank tribes may be the most important component of Hashemite rule. King Abdullah in the future will have to engage in a very important balancing act: moving forward in reforming political and economic systems, which the majority of the population demand, while maintaining the support of his most important pillar, which benefits most from the status quo.
BERRY